

WHAT IF I DON'T KNOW THE LANGUAGE?: TWO STEPS BEYOND PHYSICALLY BROWSING WITH A DICTIONARY IN THE FOREIGN DOCUMENT STACKS

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ave you looked for government information from a foreign government or other entity and become frustrated when text is in a language which you don't know?

Has your approach to reference service been curtailed when a website in a language you know – English or Spanish, for example – isn't the preferred language of your patron?

Have you wanted to immerse students in sources produced in another country, and lost their interest when they could not translate the materials into a language they understand?

This article begins with a note on the joy of browsing in a foreign documents collection. The "first step beyond" is a tip on where to browse through foreign government websites. The "second step" consists of applying a translation engine to words, phrases, or an entire website, when wanting to translate from one language to another. The 'state of the art' does not yet make this a proposition which works every time. It can however, lead to an enjoyable teaching and learning experience.

Background: Physical Browsing and Virtual Browsing through the Library OPAC

For at least thirty years in the former Documents Department of the Indiana University Libraries in Bloomington (now the Government Information, Microforms, and Statistical Services Department, to be abbreviated as G.I.M.S.S.), publications of foreign governments were organized and shelved in an archival manner which grouped those of particular countries together in adjacent shelving areas. Students and researchers onsite would be guided to an aisle of gorgeous coral-colored marbled volumes where they searched the indexes and volumes of the French *Journal Officiel*. Groups of sixth graders would experience an immersion as they toured the library/biblioteca of Latin American materials from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Groups of books from West Bengal or Delhi bound in cotton cloth from village-based spinning and weaving initiatives brought the history of

twentieth century India into the immediate world of students.

Today, an ever-growing number of cataloged documents are organized by the Library of Congress classification system, and shelved with others about the same subjects from diverse points of origin. Records for foreign government publications of the last decade which are represented in Indiana University's online catalog, IUCAT, <http://www/iucat.iu.edu/>, often include urls, or increasingly, link to items which were "born digital", and won't exist in a paper format unless a user chooses to print. Remote browsing through the OPAC is a great enhancement, and is available to anyone with Internet access anywhere in the world.

Meanwhile web publishing by foreign governments has proceeded rapidly. Many users benefit by searching government websites directly. The following section describes two starting points.

STEP 1 – VIRTUAL BROWSING THROUGH FOREIGN GOVERNMENT WEBSITES

One-stop browsing is available through Gunnar Anzinger's *Governments on the WWW*, <http://www.gksoft.com/govt/>. (Although this site has not been updated since 2001, it remains the single most comprehensive single place to find direct links to government websites worldwide.) The user chooses to see government websites listed by world region, or by other characteristics (parliaments or statistics, for example). I.U.'s G.I.M.S.S. foreign website, <http://www.indiana.edu/~libgpd/foreign.html>, provides other links to resources from foreign governments. Many websites include a language choice on the opening screen. If no choice is presented, the user may proceed to browse in the single language of the website.

As the user browses, he or she may discover that he or she doesn't know the language of a monolingual website. To quickly find the official language of a country from the G.I.M.S.S. website above, scroll to the link for the *World Factbook* at the bottom of the page, <http://www.indiana.edu/~libgpd/foreign.html>. The *World Factbook's* home page, <http://www.odci.gov/cia/>

publications/factbook, includes a button for “field listings” near the top of the page. The list of fields includes “language”, and a click here presents the user with a list of countries and their official and minority languages.

STEP 2 – TRANSLATING

The G.I.M.S.S. webpage includes a link to a group of translation engines, <http://translation.langenberg.com>. The possibilities listed at the top of the page include “Identify/Guess Language”, “Translate One Word at a Time”, and “Translate a Web Page”. The links lead to machine translation systems. You can discover others by simply typing “translation engines” into your favorite search engine, and experimenting with the results. An example of how this might work in practice follows:

- A. *Governments on the WWW*, <http://www.gksoft.com/govt>, provides a link to the web page you would like to translate.
- B. Launch your translation engine in another window, <http://babel.altavista.com/tr?>
- C. Type the target web page url in the search box, and pull the drop down menu to indicate both the source and the target languages (Spanish to English, for example.)
- D. Read the results with caution and curiosity!

CONCLUSION:

Some users will find the above process above tedious, or the translations too ambiguous or rough. Errors and flaws abound when an engine can not locate the target web page. Disappointments arise when no engines are available for the languages you need. However, some will experience applying the search engine as a powerful learning device, and revel in increased personal access to unfamiliar texts and documents.

In conclusion and contrast, listen to a few of the 43 languages currently represented in audio, or read the text at the website of the BBC World Service webpage, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/index.shtml>. In this highly controlled web environment, one gets the daily news in English, or in a wide range of other languages.

The basic text has been prepared from the BBC point-of-view, and the messages are similar in all languages. Was the sense of discovery as pronounced as in the “do it yourself” translating?

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